

The problem-centred interview: Response to Jaber F. Gubrium's review of the new SAGE-book "The problem-centred interview" (Witzel/Reiter 2012) in *Acta Sociologica* 2013

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The problem-centred interview.

Response to Jaber F. Gubrium's review of the new SAGE-book "The problem-centred interview" (Witzel/Reiter 2012) in Acta Sociologica 2013

Jaber F. Gubrium's review of our book "The problem-centred interview" (Witzel / Reiter 2012) is written in the perspective of a leading expert in qualitative interviewing research wondering whether there is something genuinely new for him to learn from it. This literally egocentric perspective runs like a common thread through his assessment resulting in the unambiguous conclusion: "there is not much new". By extension, and due to the power of his (self-) assured expertise ("since I had been deconstructing the interview for years"), this verdict is supposed to persuade potential readers of his review not to waste their time on reading the book. While we do appreciate fierce and factual academic controversy we need to respond to this review because it is unsubstantiated, sloppy and biased.

We do not know whether the reviewer considered the possibility that the book was not actually written primarily for leading experts in the field. But we do know from his review that he read the back cover where the target audience is defined as "novice and experienced interview researchers". Yet he chose to ignore it. Would these readers, students and lecturers perhaps, not rather want to learn from a reviewer whether a text book about the popular method of the PCI follows adequate academic and didactic standards, and whether it establishes sound links between methodological principles and methodical practice? Should a reviewer of a methods text book not be expected to establish a minimum amount of empathy regarding the target audience? At least it could have cushioned his frustration about the "usual bromides" that, we hope, are helpful at least for novice researchers. We wonder why the reviewer uses the format of a book review for his expert critique when he could equally have responded years ago to a short English open access online journal article about the PCI (Witzel 2000).¹

Next to his own expertise the originality of the method is another benchmark for the reviewer's assessment; it is associated with his expectation to find something "new". Again he is disappointed. Perhaps like we, some potential readers may be puzzled to learn that there appears to be a book with the title "The problem-centred interview", which manages to communicate "little if anything distinctive" about the very problem-centred interview on some 200 pages. How come an academic publisher would produce such a book? How come referees and endorsements would be favourable? Jaber F. Gubrium's review may indeed stimulate the curiosity of some potential readers to find out whether it can be true that the book "does not work as a method book and should not have been published". We hope there will be readers that question the plausibility of the reviewer's display of disappointment and see for themselves if such a bastard of a book can exist. What could they find that the reviewer did not?

Unlike the reviewer, readers may in fact find quite extensive discussions of the methodological and methodical peculiarities of problem-centred interviewing, for instance in

the introduction in Chapter 1 (Witzel / Reiter 2012: pp. 1-11); in Chapter 2 about the programme of the PCI (ibid., pp. 12-34); and again in Chapter 7 summarising the basic principles of problem-centred interviewing (ibid., pp. 176-178). Unlike the reviewer, some readers may stumble over the subject index of the book and find "Problem-centring" and about ten entries related to "PCI, definition of". And some readers may even find it surprising that an academic reviewer would base his opinion on ignoring and leaving out substantial parts of the book under review – like the original communication strategies of the PCI, or the innovative, as we think, classification of pitfalls of PCI interviewing that makes sense only against the background of the essential principles of the technique.

The reviewer installs his withering assessment of the textbook right at the beginning of the review by questioning the discriminatory power of the very label of problem-centring. "Are there forms of interviewing that are not about problems?", he asks, and we need to agree with him that the PCI, like other forms of interviewing, can indeed be used for a wide range of issues. Yet we need to return the question to the expert: Are non-discriminatory and somewhat inappropriate labels for forms of interviews the exception or the rule? For instance, are not all purposeful qualitative interviews somehow 'focused' (Merton / Kendall 1946), or 'active' (Holstein / Gubrium 1995)? How should we imagine an inactive or passive qualitative interview? The meaningfulness of such labels cannot be revealed by ignoring the authors' specifications. Readers may wonder how the mere label, a more or less appropriate adjective, can disqualify an interviewing technique as a whole.

The only plausible answer that we can suggest as authors is that the expert reviewer confused the technique with its purpose. He denies the adjective 'problem-centred' the quality of being a token for a methodologically grounded concept that is extensively discussed in the book. Instead, he equates the label only with possible research objects that the PCI might want to explore². And as potential applications appear unlimited the reviewer seems compelled to conclude that the method of the PCI has no genuine significance.

In short, we thought that, despite including two words that may irritate the American taste, the following sentence would clarify the meaning of problem in problem-centred: "The French notion of "problématique" or the German term "Problemstellung" refers to a specific research question – this would be a more appropriate meaning for the 'problem' in problem-centred interviews" (Witzel/Reiter 2012: p.4). PCIs investigate "a societal problem with immediate relevance for individuals" (ibid.: p.5). Thus, a key precondition of conducting PCIs is: "the research question has to correspond to an everyday problem in the perspective of practical knowledge that the respondent can articulate and also has an interest in dealing with" (ibid.). The problem-centred agenda consists in focussing all research efforts and especially the PCI communication strategies on understanding the respondent's subjective perspective on specific problems. Problem-centred communication uses prior knowledge in a way that it does not inhibit but foster the reconstruction of the respondents' subjective meaning of actions and orientations in a discursive and dialogic interview interaction. We discuss the epistemological challenge of this discursive-dialogic reconstruction of knowledge in Chapter 2.2.

Three examples are able to illustrate that the reviewer's judgements tend to be unsubstantiated and hardly go any deeper than the nowadays common distinction between 'like' and 'don't like', thumbs up or down. First example: The reviewer refuses to acknowledge our efforts to connect the discussion of the PCI to the very useful distinction between the interviewer as miner and the interviewer as traveller put forward by Kvale (1996).³ We can only wonder why the reviewer chooses to reject the value of our alternative notion of 'well-informed traveller' as a metaphor for an interviewer that applies certain communication strategies to

balance the following essential dilemma of qualitative interviewing: the use of deductively available prior knowledge bears the risk of imposing issues and interpretations on the respondents; whereas the neglect of such prior knowledge together with ascribing a *tabula rasa* status to the respondents bears the risk of missing out on good questions. The latter goes hand in hand with the largely uncontrolled influence of not explicated but available prior knowledge. Instead of sharing his thoughts about this dilemma the reviewer only dismisses its persistent relevance by pointing out that it has been a "feature of participatory forms of interviewing for years". Nothing new... Second example: The reviewer claims without further ado "that illustrative 'boxes' obfuscated more than they illuminated their subject matter". Do we really need to counter this by underlining that the idea of using such boxes follows the very sensible suggestion of textbook publishers to include illustrations, at least for students? Third example: The reviewer merely asserts that "several things ... are oddly out of place". Now we would need an illustration.

In some places, the review is sloppy and faulty. And we need to wonder whether there is any quality control of book reviews, both favourable and unfavourable, in *Acta Sociologica*. For instance, the reviewer appears to have read a book where "the last three chapters ... described at length the studies that used PCIs". Actual readers, on the other hand, will find that there is only one chapter, the pre-last one, illustrating the problem-centred approach on the basis of two of the three exemplary studies introduced throughout the book. Unlike the reviewer who is "frustratingly" unable to appreciate the use of three exemplary studies throughout the book because they are "only cursorily mentioned at the start of the book", actual readers may learn from the introduction and especially Box 1.2 on pages 6 to 7 about the role of these three exemplary studies and how related descriptions are integrated didactically into several chapters. Unlike the reviewer, some readers may not think that nowadays a textbook is necessarily a linear medium that one reads through from the first to the last page. In fact, we made quite an effort to integrate many cross-references into the book; obviously this can only be appreciated if the reader is ready to turn pages both ways.

Finally, there is the reviewer's dislike of our language. For decades, the English methods debate, like the German one, has been stewing in its own juice. We were pleased to find with SAGE a publisher that is curious enough and committed to breaking up the isolation of academic discourses and to participating in the European project of bridging cultures. The publisher respected features of national language traditions and decided not to eradicate, in this case, all that reminds of particularly German ways of constructing sentences or building arguments. And German academia is certainly not famous for deliberating in "clear and straightforward ... prose" that the reviewer seems to be so used to. Or is the reviewer irritated by our English translations of everyday language examples from German interviews? In this case, he could now also consult the original text passages, at least if he spoke German. The publisher was kind enough to include the German interview examples used in boxes, pitfalls and tables in the Sample material provided online.⁴

After all these obscure allegations in the review of our book, we want to have a try at an explanation for its motivation. We believe that the reviewer's repeated frustration at having learned "not much new" is the key to understanding his disappointment. What is the reference of the comparison that is implicit in this conclusion? With regard to what is the reviewer's expectation of something new disappointed? Or: what is it that the reviewer has known long ago that he now likes to discount as "usual bromides"? We cannot think of an alternative reference of comparison than the technique of the active interview that the reviewer had co-developed some time ago (Holstein / Gubrium 1995). And we believe that he is bothered by its similarities to the PCI.

We want to illustrate our interpretation by means of a “Gedankenexperiment” (thought experiment). Due to his long-standing expertise and involvement in advancing qualitative interview methods, should the reviewer not at least point to some overlap of the PCI and his own methodological/methodical ideas? Should he not be particularly curious about possible commonalities and differences between the active interview and the PCI, two approaches that were developed independently and embedded within separate academic cultures? Should he not actually appreciate our publication as an opportunity to initiate and promote, instead of suffocate cross-cultural comparative interview research? To us this seems to be a much neglected field of work that we were not able appropriately to integrate into our discussion. And critique based on such a comparison would have been most welcome!

The review does none of this. The reviewer chose to treat the book in such a superficial way that potential and perhaps inexperienced readers will not in the slightest be tempted to discover methodical overlaps of the PCI to other approaches, and in particular his own. Based on the hostility of the review we can only speculate that the reviewer was not at all pleased to learn that the original publication of the PCI predates that of his and Holstein's active interview by more than a decade (Witzel 1982). Is this the reason why the reviewer in his last paragraph turns the tables and concedes to the apparently obsolete and long outdated PCI only the status of a historical footnote?⁵ We can only interpret his motivation to condescend to such a strangely aggressive, scathing review of a method that he, as he had to realise, “[c]ould have known years ago” as an attempt to leave unquestioned the originality of his own approach by simply omitting any discussion of possible overlap.

We regret that the reviewer appears to perceive our book in the perspective of transatlantic competition rather than enrichment. It is a pity that a powerful expert reviewer would abuse the format of a review of a book for “novice and experienced interview researchers” to drum up general disinterest. The review is not what it is supposed to be: the result of a critical and scholarly examination of a textbook. And it is certainly not an invitation to international dialogue.

Footnotes

1. Indeed, this multilingual online qualitative research journal would have given the reviewer not only the chance to “have known years ago” about the PCI; he could also have learned about other qualitative methods in countries beyond the radar of “Americans like (him) who practice the trade in one language”. For example Germany: Mruck (2000).
2. Gubrium: “Social problems? Personal problems? Conceptual problems? Procedural problems? Informational problems? Therapeutic problems? Ethical problems? The list is endless. Why would one conduct interviews if there weren't a problem leading the way?”
3. Gubrium: “...why present it so positivistically, as if the well-informed traveller forgets PCI's reflexive mission and repeatedly takes on the role of the contrasting 'minor-interviewer'?”
4. www.uk.sagepub.com/books/Book234106
5. Gubrium: “The other answer would have depended on the goal being a retrospective account of the historical context...What made it possible for that to happen at Bremen and in Germany?”

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